2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt

THE FELLĀḤÎN OF UPPER EGYPT

563 to the northern part of the country. Europeans of various nationalities have for many years past settled in Egypt, most of them being engaged in business connected with the production and sale of cotton, sugar, and the like.

361 137 The villages of Egypt (see Fig. 4), as seen from the railway-carriage or from points of vantage in the cultivation, present a most picturesque appearance. They are generally surrounded with palm-groves, often very extensive, while palm-trees also grow actually among the houses, affording a welcome shelter from the

[343]

FIG. 5. A PIGEON-HOUSE

heat. These palm-girt villages are dotted about all over the cultivation, the brilliant green of which presents a startling con- [133] trast to the immediately adjacent, and seemingly endless, desert. Sometimes a village encroaches right on to the edge of the desert, the upper slopes of which tower above it, forming a most romantic background. During the period of inundation the villages, which [132] stand on a somewhat higher level than the surrounding cultivation, appear like palm-encircled islands in a vast inland sea, a geographical feature also remarked upon by Herodotus.[1]

343 231 Pigeon-houses (see Fig. 5) are prominent architectural features in a village. They are sometimes in the form of towers, with sloping, white-washed mud walls, surmounted by several layers of large pottery jars placed side by side in rows. Every jar has a hole in the base, for the ingress and egress of the pigeons. Some-

[1] ii. 97.

THE FELLĀḤĪN OF UPPER EGYPT

443 534 drum (*darābukkeh*), etc., while at a short distance the tattooer may be engaged in decorating the hand of some youth.[1]

[304] Various entertainers attend most of the larger markets, such as 443 536 787 533 a conjurer, a reciter of legends, musicians accompanied by a male dancer, to say nothing of the fortune-teller, who, seated in a small tent, usually attracts a considerable number of people. He makes a series of holes in sand spread on a handkerchief upon the ground in front of him, and by certain methods of counting these deducts his conclusions. The conjurers are really very clever.

443 461 It will thus be seen that business on market-days is pleasantly combined with pleasure.

Conversation is general and loud, sounding to the unaccustomed European ear like violent quarrelling.

443 130 437 When the warmer weather begins the traders erect rough booths, looking like primitive umbrellas, under which they can take shelter from the heat. Both time and patience are required to effect a purchase, for the seller of an article asks quite double the price he will accept. Arguing and gesticulating, the trader and would-be purchaser wrangle over the article until the price is adjusted to the satisfaction of both parties. Sometimes, if the trader is insistent, the would-be purchaser gets up from the ground and proceeds to walk away, whereupon the trader usually betrays a readiness to make further concession, and finally agrees to accept a lower price than that demanded.

443 [132] [437] In the hot season the water-carrier does good business, as heat, bargaining, and shouting make for thirst. He is usually paid not in money, so I was told, but by small presents of onions, tomatoes, or other delicacies.

I have observed that the people show praiseworthy consideration for the animals which they bring to the market. On their arrival [231] one of the first things the men do is to provide their animals with fodder, and also water if such is obtainable. One year, when I was living in the fields near a village, the market was held close to my camp, and I particularly noticed this consideration for their beasts on the part of the peasants.

As the afternoon advances the traders begin to pack up the goods which have remained unpurchased, and those who have [490] come from a distance load their baggage on their donkeys, and so depart to their several villages.

[1] See Chapter III

178 But we must at all costs avoid here even the appearance
121 of determinism. The fellah is no more the product of the Egyptian countryside than the countryside is the product of the fellah. There is no question here of inevitability, or any determining influence. Man is free, and this freedom is to be defined as "the power of self-determination".

Man is free, and cultivation remains contingent on his will. There are infinite possibilities, among which the will of man — not of the fellah, but of his master — chooses this or that, according to circumstances. At one time, the vine was grown on Egyptian soil. Grapes make wine, and the
241 veto of the Koran killed the vineyards. Not long ago, vast
249 areas were planted with tobacco, but the Government has now forbidden this. Maize of American origin, and cotton, introduced in the nineteenth century, are now chief among the crops. Tomorrow some new crop may cover the fields. No law of necessity, whether of climate or soil, determines once and for all the agriculture of Egypt; much less, then, human life. At the same time the climate and vegetation of Egypt exert a characteristic influence on those who live in, and on, the country.

181 In the case of the town-dwellers and industrial workers,
183 the bond between nature and man is looser; the impress
132 of the physical environment is softened and neutralised by the
133 stronger social, civic and political influences. This makes
121 these classes less stable, but more progressive.

The countryman, on the other hand, is moulded directly by the soil. Febvre justly criticises the generalisations of Ratzel and Brunhes on the influence of physical environment (4); but without granting their theories anything like universal applicability we may recognise that they do apply sufficiently to agricultural communities, and especially to the Egyptian fellaheen.

It will become clear, indeed, that the monotony, uniformity and productiveness of the Nile Valley have their exact counterpart in the characteristics of the fellah community. These two are not parallel but correlative. They meet and crystallise in a distinct manner of life, which is at once a geographical and a social phenomenon. It will also become clear that the water and mud of the Nile enter into and in great part explain the whole life of the fellah, his work and his home, his body and his soul, and impart

to him both their qualities and their defects. It is because the fellah 'buries' himself in this mud that it has become so fertile. Egypt, gift of the Nile, is no less a gift of the fellah. It is because this soil has incarnated itself in the fellah that he himself is so enduring, but also so material, so stagnant. 181 183 132 133 121

Progress then must come from some form of release, of emergence, from education in the original sense of drawing out potentialities. The true duty of society is to liberate the fellah's spirit from its stifling envelope of mud; to free him from the defects of the soil, while leaving him its good qualities. The initiative can never come from his own community, which is completely numbed and powerless, but only from the classes which overshadow him, from the *élite*, who with their riches of mind and money can vitalise him. In this dough must work the leaven of intelligence and sympathy.

The following chapters will illustrate in detail these general remarks, and bring us by the logic of facts to the human conclusion which we have here outlined.

241 Thus at High Nile (August to October) the fields are
132 no longer flooded, but only irrigated, and bear the crops called *nili*. When the flood is over, and the level of the flood is falling (November to April), the land, being still moist, receives sufficient water for the winter crop (*shetwi*). At Low Nile (April to July) the reservoirs are gradually emptied to provide water for ripening a third crop, called the summer crop (*sêfi*).

132 To be fruitful, the land needs not only water, but also
134 air. The sun, by the vertical cracks its summer heat makes in the level soil, plays its part in reviving the fallow land. It removes excess salt and mellows the soil by letting the air penetrate deeply into the earth, so that the land is dehydrated and renewed (').

We thus see the Nile, helped by the sun, already at work preparing and cultivating the land, and so determining the fellah's physical environment, the living Egypt.

133 In fact, wherever the Nile does not penetrate, either from above or below, the desert begins abruptly, without any intermediate zone. The conventional colourings of maps, which show Egypt as a thin green strip across a great dun-coloured space, correspond exactly with reality. From the top of the Great Pyramid near Cairo, or from the hills of the Sa'îd (*), one is struck, whichever way one looks, by the clear line of demarcation where human labour and habitation stop short. Between the cliffs of the Libyan and Arabian deserts lies a level valley, 650 miles in length. Its width is less than a mile at Wadi-Halfa (*), 3 miles at Edfu, about 8 between Luxor and Assiut, where it narrows again, and 15 at Beni-Suef, whence a branch goes off westward to the Fayûm. From Cairo it spreads out fanwise to form a coast-line of 160 miles at the north of the Delta. In all there are some 12,000 square miles of good land, lying in the midst of about 400,000 square miles of barren sand. This 3% of the whole area represents the living and productive Egypt.

Its shape is given to it by the Nile. It looks like a giant lotus, whose roots, the White and the Blue Nile, are planted in the heart of Africa, in the high mountains of Abyssinia and the great lakes of the Congo. From Khartoum the sap rises along a single stem, which pushes into Egypt at Wadi-Halfa, shows signs of green at Aswan, bears a single leaf

we shall probably be rather under- than overstating the case if we reckon the agricultural population, which is the subject of our enquiries, at twelve million souls.

Moreover, this population is increasing. Less rapidly, it is true, than that of Cairo, where between 1917 and 1927 the increase was 28%, while in the country it scarcely exceeded 10%. But in the city the rise is largely due to an influx from abroad and from the countryside; in the country it is dependent on the birthrate alone.

Thus the rural density of population is about 1300 persons to the square mile (11). Such a situation is probably without parallel except in Tonkin, where six million peasants live on 5150 square miles, giving a density of 1165, or 93% of the population on 16% of the territory. Of this mass three millions live at a density of 1400, and more than one and a half millions at 2800 (12).

The density of population in the Nile Valley is explained by the concurrence of all the conditions, geographic, economic and social, which favour a high birthrate. The climate is warm, the valley itself is flat, uniform, tractable and strictly defined. There are plentiful food crops which can provide locally for a numerous population; maize, corn, rice, lentils and beans grow throughout the country.

The cultivation of cotton necessitates a settled concentration of workers, whose labour may bring considerable profit. The perennial irrigation system on the one hand requires many labourers, and on the other hand, by raising the productivity of the soil, makes it possible for more people to live on it. The soil is divided into many small properties, either rented or privately owned. These small holdings only accentuate the overcrowding which causes them. Help is wanted as cheap as possible; children can provide it. Thus the fellah is forced by the exigencies of the land to have children, and as many as possible. This for him is the meaning of marriage and the family. Where all these conditions exist together, as in the province of Menoufiya in the Upper Delta, where the land has been longest cultivated and irrigated, where cotton is the chief crop and small holdings are the most numerous, a density of over 2,000 to the square mile is to be found (13).

Where favourable conditions are fewer the density grows less. This is so in the South, in the districts above

3: Ayrout M-5 (ca. 1935) 1945
MR13 Fellahin MR13

Chapter IV

THE FELLAH AT WORK

The preceding chapters have given a general picture of the physical and social environment of the Egyptian peasantry. Thus the problem has been stated and approached. We can now attack it directly, by considering the fellah himself, first of all at the work from which he derives his name. 121

The Arabic word *fellàh*, which has passed into most modern languages, is the intensive adjective of the verb *fàlaha*, which means to till the ground, labour or toil. 101

As the reader will have already observed, the fellah is looked upon primarily, if not exclusively, as a 'hand' or agricultural machine. As "economic man", he is equated with labour. 186 369

The work of the fellah, even more than his physical and mental make-up or his habitat, is determined by the double environment we have been considering. It seems in fact the mere consequence of the opportunities and limitations created by the soil and by society. His work will thus lead us to the consideration of the fellah as a human being, for it is he who in return carries on the work of the soil and adapts it to human needs. We have here a clear case of reciprocal festivals, interaction. 121 183

1. Methods of Work

The dark soil is not only productive, but also exacting from one year's end to another. The fellah, who is not *obliged by the Koran to take a weekly day of rest*, works the whole year round, and takes a holiday only at the great festivals, that is to say about ten days in a twelvemonth. 134 461

The sun shines for at least eleven hours a day, and in May, June and July nearer fifteen. The fellah spends by far the greater part of his time in the fields, and for some kinds of work stays there all night. 132 461

He is exposed to the elements at a mean temperature of 80°F in summer and 53°F in winter; he works barefoot and bare-headed. His labour is all muscular, and apart from his hands he uses only a few primitive implements, which, however, owing to the quality of the Egyptian soil and the multitude of manual labourers, are quite adequate.

PREPARATION OF THE SOIL

He uses the *fass* with great dexterity for a hundred different tasks, to turn and break the clods of earth, to dig furrows and till the land. The *fass* is a big tool, like a hoe, but heavy and solid. Its front part being fairly wide, it also serves as a spade. Even the poorest of labourers owns a *fass*; it is an indispensable addition to his own strong arm.

It may be said that every field in Egypt is tilled by hand, even when the fellah works with a plough, for the Egyptian plough is more of a tool than a machine, though it weighs 100 lb., and is carried to and from the field on donkey-back.

This is *el mihrat*, the Arab plough without wheels or breast, which is found in Palestine, in Syria and throughout North Africa. It consists of a wooden frame tipped with a flat, ogival share about 10 ins. long, and a shaft about 11 feet long, to which the draught animals are attached by a straight yoke pressing not on the forehead, as in Europe, but on the withers. The draught-animals may be two *gamoossas*, the smallholder's *gamoossa* and a donkey, or two animals hired for the occasion — sometimes even a camel and a donkey together.

The ploughman drives the share in by pressing on the single handle, and guides the animals as they move by hand and voice, without as a rule using either bridle or whip. In this way he can till from one third to half a feddan a day. If he is an owner his beasts will be better fed, and he will be able to till as much as three quarters of a feddan in a day. The time employed in ploughing a field is from ten to twenty-five days a year. Except in the districts under basin irrigation this work can be carried on at any season.

In the concluding chapter of their study of Egyptian ploughing[20] Audebeau and Mosseri write: "The Egyptian plough is the typical implement of areas where it is only necessary to scratch the surface in order to bury the seed

own habits often neutralise the treatment he receives, so that these diseases remain as deep-rooted as ever in the peasant class.' If only they would pay attention, until more can be done, to the advice and directions which are given them! The answer is that even if they tried they could not hope to succeed, because the conditions under which they live are at every point unfavourable to the attempt. Here lies the heart of the problem.

(4) *Food and Drink*

Water is the first problem; not this time considered for its use in irrigation, which has been studied over and over again, but as a much more vital need in supplying human nourishment. Egypt is a hot country, and the fellah's work makes him sweat, so that thirst affects him more than most other people.

Where the owner of an *'ezba* has installed a pump, the fellaheen may get their water from an artesian well. If their village is on the river bank, they will use water from the Nile, which is silty but fresh-running. But more often than not they can drink only brackish and stagnant water from the irrigation canals.

In these, men and animals cleanse and relieve themselves; vegetables, clothes, and crockery are washed, and carrion is thrown away: and this is the place to which women come to get "drinking water". They bring it home in the early evening, in their ewers or tins, to fill up the great pot, or *zir*, that stands against the house wall. Each fellaha brings back about six gallons each evening for the next day's use. This water she adds to what already remains in the *zir*, so that the bottom is never dry, and never cleaned. The water stands all night, so that some of the dirt settles. It also cools, owing to evaporation through the porous clay. As for the drops which filter through, and which might be used to fill the drinking-pots with pure water for the morning, they simply run to waste in puddles or are drunk by the fowls.

The Government, however, is busily studying the question of supplying drinking-water to the villages, and numerous plans have been made.

Men have always added something to water to give it a taste. The fellah is no exception. Wine he does not drink,

8:Schaefer A-5 (1900-1901) 1904
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt

19.

×539
821

Song to a sun-shower.

ʿĒb ʿalēk, ya naṭare,
wes-sams mefattaḥe.

Shame yourself, O rain,
For the sun has broken through!

2. Literally: "has opened". The same word is used with flowers which are unfolding, e. g. No. 6, l. 7.

20.

Preparations for a Feast.

539
527
821
[252]
[356]
[481]

Faṭne (Fatme), the daughter of the Prophet Moḥammed, and her husband ʿAli, are represented in the song as simple Egyptian peasants. She is about to bake cakes for the feast; first hastily cleaning the house and carrying the basket of sweepings out upon her head. Everyone who is acquainted with Egyptian villages, will have often seen this picture.

ʿAli, the master of the house, to please his wife, has gone as far as southern Upper Egypt, for the sake of an iron hook, for taking bread from the oven. At the beginning, the sun, which has hidden behind the clouds, is requested to show its pleasantest face at the feast; for there is not continuous blue sky in northern Upper Egypt. At Saqqāra, in winter, we often had an overcast sky and heavy rainfalls. [132]

Fattaḥi, ya semise, ya semise,
lagl ʿAli u-Moḥammadi
we-Faṭne, bint en-nabi!
u-ʿaginha ʾuddamha.